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## An Aristotelian Approach to Miller's Death of a Salesman

*Miller'ın Satıcı'nın Ölümü Oyununa Aristotelesçi  
Bir Yaklaşım*

### Özet

Tragedya bir edebi tür olarak ilk kez Aristoteles'in *Poetika*'sında ortaya çıkar. Aristoteles tragedya kuramını Aeschylus, Sophocles ve Euripides gibi oyun yazarlarının eserlerinden tümevarım yöntemiyle oluşturur. Farklı yüzyıllar farklı tragedya türlerinin ortaya çıkmasına neden olduysa da ve özellikle Arthur Miller'ın *Tragedya ve Sıradan İnsan* yazısından sonra tragedya bakış büyük ölçüde değiştiyse de, Aristoteles'in fikirleri biraz esnek bakıldığında çoğu tragedyanın olay örgüsüne uyarlanabilir. Yirminci yüzyıl Amerikan tiyatrosunda domestic tragedya da aslında Aristoteles'in belirttiği kalıplara benzer özellikler taşımaktadırlar. Arthur Miller'ın *Satıcının Ölümü* sözkonusu dönemin başyapıtlarından biridir ancak oyun birçok eleştirmene göre *Poetika*'daki kalıpların bazılarını açıkça reddetmektedir. Ancak Aristoteles'in altı tragedya öğesinden en önemli üçü olan olay örgüsü, karakter ve düşünce bakımından incelendiğinde Miller'ın oyununun aslında bu kalıplara uyduğu görülmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Arthur Miller, Aristoteles, tragedya, Poetika, Satıcının Ölümü

### Abstract

The earliest discussion of tragedy as a genre is found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle based his theory on induction from the tragedies of Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Although different centuries have given rise to various types of tragedy and the definition of tragedy considerably changed especially after Arthur Miller's *Tragedy and the Common Man*, Aristotle's discussions –when flexibly managed– apply to many tragic plots. Accordingly, domestic tragedies in American Drama in the mid-twentieth century follow a pattern similar to that of Aristotle's. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is one of the masterpieces of the particular period, which –for many– rejects some of the Aristotelian principles in *Poetics*. However, in terms of plot structure, character, and thought, the most important three of the six components of tragedy for Aristotle, Miller's play conforms to the rules set for a tragic play.

**Keywords:** Arthur Miller, Aristotle, tragedy, Poetics, Death of a Salesman

## Introduction

The term “tragedy” is now broadly applied to literary or non-literary representations of serious actions culminating in a disastrous end for the protagonist. The earliest discussion of tragedy as a genre is found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Aristotle based his theory on induction from the tragedies of Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. According to Aristotle six elements determine the quality of a tragic play: Plot, Character (indicants), Thought, Spectacle, Diction, and Music (13). Among these elements the first three constituents indicate what tragedy proposes to achieve an imitation of; thus, they are the major essentials required for a tragedy. Although different centuries have given rise to various types of tragedy, Aristotle’s discussions –when flexibly managed– apply to many tragic plots (Abrams 322). Accordingly, domestic tragedies in American Drama in the mid-twentieth century follow a pattern similar to that of Aristotle’s. Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is one of the examples of the particular period. As June Schlueter argues, this play has become really familiar and popular to high school and college students, especially because it lends itself to many different approaches: some adopt the generic approach employing Miller’s own essay “Tragedy and the Common Man”, whereas others apply the Marxist approach while Schlueter herself adopts a postmodern approach (142). As Martin states many critics do not regard Willy Loman as a tragic hero, for he is too common and little to meet the requirements in *Poetics*; however, for Aristotle “the prime quality of tragedy is not character, but plot” as character is always second to plot (99). Therefore, analysed in terms of Aristotle’s definitions of plot structure, character, and thought, Miller’s play conforms to the rules set for a tragic play.

### 1. Plot Structure

Plot is of great significance for Aristotle since he considers tragedy as the imitation of action and of life, not of men. “Without action there could be no tragedy, but there could be tragedy without character” (Aristotle 13-14). For a proper tragic plot, Aristotle mentions some requirements like Hubris, Hamartia, Peripeteia, Pathos, Catharsis, and Anagnorisis, all of which can be found in *Death of a Salesman*. Hubris is the protagonist’s pride in tragedy; it is one of the causes of his downfall. Willy Loman is a salesman proud of himself, and he takes it for granted that everybody loves and respects him. Willy, because of his pride, misadvises his sons Biff and Happy, both of whom are in their thirties but unable to have proper jobs and settled lives. Willy’s misleading advices are partly responsible for their malfunction: “You’re built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. ‘Willy Loman is here!’ that’s all they have to know, and I go right through” (DS 33). He believes that being liked is a key to open any door, and he misguides his children with his flattering words. Jacobson puts forth that “the assumption that prominence brings affection and privilege frequently has led the Lomans to boast or lie about themselves” (252). Because of this misconception, Willy misestimates the key to achievement, which is not being well-liked, but working hard.

Willy’s pride is also the reason for his poverty and misery. He has a job, yet he does not get a regular salary and he has to travel a lot despite his old age. He constantly

borrow money from his friend Charley, but when Charley offers him a good job, he just turns it down:

CHARLEY. I offered you a job. You can make fifty dollars a week. And I won't send you on the road.

WILLY. I've got a job.

CHARLEY. Without pay? [...] I am offering you a job.

WILLY. I don't want your goddam job!

CHARLEY. When the hell are you going to grow up? (DS 96-97)

Willy rejects the job as he feels humiliated to be employed by his friend. He is proud and he is jealous of his friend, for he is successful. His pride blinds him and takes him towards his catastrophe.

Willy's hamartia, a flaw or an error judgement, contributes to his downfall. His "inability to understand the reality of his competitive salesman's world marks him as merely a pathetic figure, and determines, in effect, his fate" (Martin 101). He still regrets not going abroad with his brother Ben, who made a lot of money in a very short time: "God! Why didn't I go to Alaska with my brother Ben that time! Ben! That man was a genius, that man was success incarnate! What a mistake! He begged me to go" (DS 41). Field agrees that one of the errors Willy did was his "wrong choice of careers" (20).

Another mistake is his committing adultery. His son, Biff, fails one of his lessons and to talk about repeating the lesson at summer school, he goes to Boston to see his father. He hears a woman in his father's hotel room and asks him who she is. Willy lies and claims there is no one, but a woman comes out of the bathroom, and Biff realizes that his father cheats on his mother. Biff bursts out crying and leaves the hotel immediately. Because of this trauma, he does not go to summer school and cannot graduate from his school, which ruins his life. Field argues that "Willy committed a crime for which he is justly punished" (19). In fact, Willy has made more than one mistakes in his life because of the flaws in his personality.

What Aristotle means by "peripeteia" is a reversal "by which the action veers around in the opposite direction [...] in accordance with the laws of probability or necessity (21). On account of his pride, Willy has not been able to keep up with changing times and now he realizes that people do not respect him any longer: "They seem to laugh at me [...] I'm fat. I'm very – foolish to look at Linda" (DS 36-37). Whereas he was a well-respected salesman in the past, now he cannot find many buyers and he cannot make money. The reversal is the reason for the break-out of pathos, the feeling of pity for the protagonist. The reader or audience cannot help sympathizing with and pitying Willy. The feeling of pity stemming from Willy's downfall is greater than any other literary character's because "Loman fell only from 'an imagined height'" (Huftel qtd in Jacobson 247). Another result of Willy's downfall is catharsis, which is the release of powerful and healing emotions.

Anagnorisis, i.e., recognition, is the change of the protagonist "from a state of ignorance into a state of knowledge [...] The best type of recognition is one which is accompanied by reversal" (Aristotle 21). Having experienced the failure in his career,

Willy now sees that the key to success is not his popularity but hard work. When he goes to borrow money from Charley, he talks to Charley's son, Bernard, for a while and learns that he has become a lawyer. Bernard will argue a case in the Supreme Court, but he does not even talk about it. Willy is astonished at Bernard's achievement and modesty: "No! The Supreme Court! [...] The Supreme Court! And he didn't even mention it!" (DS 95). Willy has always belittled Bernard since he thought Bernard was not well-liked by his friends at school although he was a good student. Now he realizes his mistake and understands that hard work is the way to success. However, his recognition does not prevent the catastrophe, an integral part of tragedy. At the end of the play, after many abortive attempts, he manages to suicide hoping that the insurance money will help his son, Biff, to have a better future.

## 2. Character

Character is the second element in Aristotle's ranking. Since tragedy is the imitation of an action, it depicts characters in action. To be called 'tragic', a character must be a "man of much glory and good fortune" (Aristotle 24). For this reason, tragic heroes have been associated with nobility for centuries. However, in the twentieth century, Arthur Miller claimed that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were [...] The tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing--his sense of personal dignity" (894).

Willy Loman is an ordinary salesman, but he is 'tragic' enough to sacrifice his own life for his personal dignity and for Biff's future. He is a tragic hero because Aristotle says that "the tragic hero will most effectively evoke both our pity and terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad but a mixture of both" (qtd in Abrams 322). Linda is aware of the fact that Willy is such a character; he is neither totally good nor totally bad. Therefore, she tries to help and protect him. When Biff calls Willy crazy, she gets furious:

The make Charley your father, Biff. You can't do that, can you? I don't say that he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being [...] A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away. (DS 56)

Linda strengthens Miller's view that common people can be tragic heroes as well. She wants her children to respect their father. She wants them to sympathise with Willy since he is going through a difficult period; he cannot make money, he is losing his self-dignity, and his children cannot meet his expectations. However, despite Linda's warnings, Biff and Happy are indifferent to their father's plight.

Travelling to other cities on business, Willy has had many so-called accidents. Nevertheless, Linda finds out that Willy has been trying to kill himself. She lets her kids know the situation: "The insurance inspector came. He said that they evidence. That all these accidents in the last year—weren't—weren't—accidents" (DS 58). Willy told his family he fell asleep while driving, but he was lying. Linda is sure that Willy has been

trying to suicide because she has found a short rubber pipe in the cellar and a new little nipple on the gas pipe. She knows that Willy has been trying to inhale gas to kill himself.

In the end, Biff and Happy talk to their father and express themselves. They shatter his illusions by admitting that they are ordinary and not qualified at all. They want Willy to accept them as they are. Willy is upset and disillusioned, but at least he feels that his son Biff loves him. He wants to do a last favour to Biff by leaving him an inheritance, his twenty-thousand-dollar life assurance. Thus, he gets into his car one night and drives away, towards his death.

### 3. Thought

Another indispensable element of a tragic play is thought – the thinking ability of the characters. However, in order to name any speech as 'thought', a character must be "confronted with something he must choose or reject" (Aristotle 15). In *Death of a Salesman*, 'thought' is a significant constituent. Dramatic political, economic, and sociological changes shaping American society in the twentieth century made man confront a big dilemma, since the process of change is always painful. Man had to choose either to face the harsh new conditions in the real life or to take refuge in the soothing illusions of sweet nostalgia. Willy Loman is a victim of the new forces shaping American society and of the groundless belief in the American Dream. According to Martin, what makes him a tragic hero is his "misplaced optimism, his inheritance from nineteenth-century America" (102). He used to be a respectable and successful travelling salesman, but he could not adapt to the social and economic changes of the new century. Now he travels hundreds of miles every day, but sometimes comes back home without having earned a cent. He is not given a regular salary and he borrows fifty dollars every week from his friend Charley, which is certainly humiliating for him. He became dependent on loans to survive and support his family. This radical change produces a big conflict for Willy; he is unable to survive in the past, yet he cannot stand the present either. His social and economic ruin results in his loss of self-esteem, and to make up for the loss he resorts to the reassuring arms of nostalgia and illusions.

What lies beneath Willy's trauma is the abrupt changes capitalism has brought about. Talking to his wife, Linda, after another unsuccessful and exhausting day, Willy accuses the system: "The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood [...] There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening!" (DS 17-18). He easily acquits himself of his failure in his job and blames the others. However, it is Willy who cannot adapt to the requirements of the new competitive system. His inability to admit his own responsibility makes him "a pathetic figure" (Martin 101). He has always been after easy success and easy wealth.

Due to his miscalculations, Willy continues to mislead Biff when he [Biff] decides to talk to Oliver – his ex-boss. In fact Biff's kleptomania gets him fired from any job he finds. However, Willy has a high opinion of his son and flatters him: "If anything falls off the desk while you're talking to him – like a package or something – don't you pick it up. They have office boys for that [...] And don't undersell yourself. No less than fifteen thousand dollars [...] Because you got a greatness in you, Biff, remember that" (DS 67). Field argues that Willy has deserved his tragic end; his crime is "that he has tried to

mould his sons in his own image, that he has turned them into wind-bags and cry-babies" (23). For instance, although Biff has achieved nothing so far, Willy keeps on blandishing and praising him unnecessarily. He has caused his sons to create a false self-image, which is always accompanied by ruin.

Feeling defeated and unfruitful, Willy constantly takes refuge in the memories of the past, when he was still a successful and a respectable salesman. However, his overuse of his memories as a defense turns out to be an addiction for him. When he admits his failure to Linda, he hears the laughter of a woman, and the laughter gets louder and louder. It is the laughter of the woman with whom Willy had an affair. Her laughter blends with Linda's speech. In other words, the illusionary merges with the real. Willy's memories of his brother Ben, who died a while ago, also disturb him time and again. His conversation with Ben overlaps his conversations with Charley, his friend:

BEN. Is mother living with you?  
 WILLY. No, she died a long time ago.  
 CHARLEY. Who?  
 BEN. That's too bad. Fine specimen of a lady, Mother.  
 WILLY [to Charley] Heh?  
 BEN. I'd hoped to see the old girl.  
 CHARLEY. Who died?  
 BEN. Heard anything from Father, have you?  
 WILLY.[unnerved] What do you mean, who died?  
 CHARLEY.[taking a pot] What're you talkin' about? (DS 46)

Willy talks to both Ben and Charley, which reveals that his defense mechanism gets out of control at times and he gradually loses his touch with the real world.

Willy, like Ancient Greek tragic heroes, encounters a dilemma; he has to either accept the values of the changed world or retreat back into his illusions and memories. He prefers the latter unfortunately and cannot face the facts in his life. In addition to his yearning for an escape, the reasons underlying his disaster are various: "He is defeated by society; he is too weak and immoral for any social conditions; he once made a wrong choice of careers" (Field 20). However, the major reason for his ruin is his self-delusions which lead to his miscalculation of reality. His self-delusions turn into hallucinations in the course of time and he finally commits suicide, which was the only thing he was able to do. He always lived in his grandiose delusions and as a result, his downfall even is a delusion, since neither his living nor his death makes any difference. His suicide was just "the final affirmation in a failed life" (Martin 105).

### Conclusion

The rules of tragedy set by Aristotle can be applied to many plays from different centuries. Despite many critics claiming that *Death of a Salesman* rejects Aristotelian notions of tragedy, it is indeed a modern example which is in accordance with the established rules with reference to its plot structure, characterisation, and use of thought.

In the plot structure, it is easy to recognise the ancient Greek elements of hubris, hamartia, peripeteia, pathos, catharsis, and anagnorisis in relation to the protagonist, Willy. Characterisation is different from Aristotle's standards because Willy is not of the noble class. Nonetheless, he acts for his self-dignity, sacrifices his own life for his son, and he is not thoroughly bad, so he deserves to be called a tragic hero. As for thought, Willy undergoes a big conflict due to the changing times and he cannot adapt to the new world. Thus, he makes a choice and prefers the affectionate embrace of his nostalgic illusions. In consideration of these three major elements comprising tragedy, *Death of a Salesman* is definitely one of the outstanding examples of the genre.

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